

# PARENTS IN PAIN

## Relationship Issues in Parenting a Child with ADHD

by Richard Lougy, LMFT, and David Rosenthal, MD

**“Help me, I’m losing my child.”** The eminent psychologist Russell Barkley writes of these words, spoken to him years ago by the mother of a child with ADHD, expressing the pain and fear that parents frequently experience. Out of the continuing discord between child and parent, there seems to develop a distancing that can be very painful to the parent. The parent senses the loss of her bond with her child. This sudden fear can make a parent, who has provided so much patience and understanding, feel unloved.

The parent senses this loss but may not be able to put it into words. She knows that, in contrast to her relationship with her other children, the exchanges with her affected child can make her feel empty and guilty. One mother said she didn’t want her son having angry feelings about her, recalling the anger she had had toward her father. She said, “He used to yell, scream, and make me feel terrible, and I feel I’m doing the same things to my son. He’s only ten; wait until he’s fourteen—he’ll hate me.” Another parent dealing with a very difficult daughter broke down in the therapist’s office, pleading for some relief from their turbulent interchanges.

Parents in pain, knowing that few understand their feelings of loss, blame themselves. They see only dark clouds on the horizon and have little faith or hope that the clouds will pass. They can become moody, agitated, and irritable toward the child and other family members. Unfortunately, in trying to compensate for their feelings of guilt, the parent can become overly involved with the child at the expense of other family members.

The child, picking up on the parent’s disappointment, can withdraw into himself or become a child who feels victimized and unloved, taking out his unhappiness on others around him. Sometimes the negative interactions between child and parent can become a family affair. As Ned Hallowell and John Ratey wrote in *Driven to Distraction*, there is a danger that “virtually anything that goes wrong in the family [will] be blamed on the ADHD child.”

How can a parent’s feelings of loss or alienation from their child with ADHD be addressed and healed?

### Accept the child you have

An important first step in overcoming the fear of losing your child and improving your relationship with your child is for you to begin to give up the child you wanted and accept the child you have. It means giving up long-held dreams and expectations concerning your child. Parents have dreams and expectations for their child even before the child is born, dreams that become dear and important in a parent’s mind, expectations not only for the child, but for the parent’s relationship with their child.

Parents commonly report the many challenges they face daily in raising their child. Many expectations and hopes are tempered by the daily conflicts and personal sacrifices that result from raising their child. The child, in the parent’s most private thoughts, can become not the bounty of fulfilled expectations but the emptiness of lost dreams. Their love for their child is not questioned or diminished, but their relationship with their child can be very painful at times.

It’s of the utmost importance to begin to accept your child’s disorder and acknowledge how it impacts daily on his decisions and behaviors. Your child is not defined by his or her disorder, but it can play an important role in his or her day-to-day actions.

### Don’t create an atmosphere of blame

A parent’s feedback needs to be honest and helpful to the child. It’s important not to use words or actions that create an atmosphere of blame toward the child. It is so easy to become frustrated and desperate when dealing with a child with ADHD. After many years of pleading, begging, ignoring, and punishing, a parent can find

himself or herself drifting toward a pattern of blaming the child more often than not.

No parent is perfect, and it is not uncommon to find a parent’s focus centered often around blame. We frequently hear parents describe feelings of guilt and remorse over saying to their child, “You are just lazy, not forgetful,” or “If you love me as you say you do, you wouldn’t keep ignoring me.” Most parents know with hindsight that this is hurtful to the child and is not accurate. Their child has ADHD, and forgetting and not listening is something the child struggles with every day.

It’s important to recognize and acknowledge if your pattern of interacting with your child is generally one of blame. Blame seldom solves a problem, but more often alienates the child from the parent and makes communication between child and parent more difficult. Sometimes, in desperation to pacify an upset teacher, mate, or neighbor, a parent will get into the blame game with their child. They know it’s wrong in their heart, but are hoping that blaming will cause the guilt-ridden child to change his ways. Seldom does this work for long.

### Your child doesn’t need your pity

An important step toward acknowledging the child you have is to not pity him—yes, pity. The child needs your guidance, not pity. An affected child needs a parent’s honest feedback when his or her behavior is appropriate or inappropriate.

It is human nature to pity someone who is experiencing difficulties. When we see a paralyzed child in a wheelchair or a blind child having difficulties opening a door or finding her place in a classroom, it is a natural reaction to want to help. Upon reflection, though, one may not necessarily be doing the child a favor by helping.

If you view your child’s disorder as a challenge he will have to learn to deal with and learn about, not something you can change, you will begin to view your responsibilities in a healthier way. Rather than focusing mainly on his mistakes and hoping that he will learn from them, you can comment on his strengths and how these behaviors



**Richard Lougy, LMFT**, is a school psychologist based in Sacramento, California. **David Rosenthal, MD**, is a child, adolescent, and adult psychiatrist based in Boulder, Colorado. They are coauthors of *ADHD: A Survival Guide for Parents and Teachers* (Hope Press, 2002) and *Teaching Young Children with ADHD: Successful Strategies and Practical Interventions for PreK-3* (Corwin Press, 2007). They coauthored *The School Counselor’s Guide to ADHD: What to*

*Know and Do to Help Your Students* (Corwin Press, 2009) with Silvia DeRuvo.



ISTOCK

can help him become a productive adult.

Like Thom Hartmann in *Attention Deficit Disorder: A Different Perception*, you could view your child's hunter archetype as neither a deficit nor a disorder, but as a set of skills, abilities, and personality tendencies that he can draw upon to be successful. Guide and counsel your child, providing age-appropriate information to help him understand his disorder and that his ADHD traits may someday be an asset and not a daily hindrance to his social and personal development.

### Have the courage to be imperfect

Self-esteem comes from reaching personal goals and being successful, and a large part of that responsibility lies with the child, who can hopefully begin to identify and recognize with maturity that his traits can present both challenges and successes. A parent can provide an environment for finding success, but a parent cannot ensure success will happen. You can try to give your child the "courage to be imperfect," and model that success generally comes with small steps, one at a time, and not in giant leaps.

When you adopt these attitudes, you may find that you will feel less anxious and less fearful of losing your child. Hopefully, with time, you will find relief from the fear of losing your child. A parent needs to be forgiving of the child's mistakes and acknowledge that the child will test their patience every day. You have made many positive decisions, so don't get too down on yourself. You will continue to make mistakes—everyone does. As psychiatrist Rudolf Dreikers wrote in *Children: The Challenge*, "Perfection is an impossible goal, and striving for it seldom leads to improvement, but more often to giving up in despair." ●

## Tips for Parenting Through the Pain

### › A relationship is the responsibility of both parties.

Your child contributes to both the negative and positive patterns in your interactions. A relationship is bi-directional and both sides contribute to its successes and challenges.

### › Walk away if the interactions become too negative.

A conflict, by definition, involves two parties; if you walk away, your child will be alone. Conflicts contribute to patterns of alienation between parent and child. This doesn't mean you walk away from your child completely, but only when the negative interactions between the two of you become intense and destructive to the relationship. Get back together to discuss the problem when both parties have calmed down.

### › Catch your child being good.

Make sure each day you let your child know he makes many good decisions and is trying his best. For younger children, "Beans in a Jar" is popular. Give your child two or three beans each time you

observe him being good or caring: "I like the way you shut the bathroom door when you left. Here are three beans to put in your jar." At the end of the day, sit down with your child and count the beans. For every three beans, the child puts a star on his chart. Best to hang it where all can see. When he has a difficult moment, you can tell him: "See all the stars on your chart, you make many good decisions."

### › Don't pity your child, but help him to recognize that some tasks will be more challenging than others.

ADHD is a disorder that children generally don't outgrow, and they need to find successful ways to deal with its challenges.

### › Don't form a mob mentality directed at the child, blaming all family troubles on him or her.

It's easy to fall into this trap, making the child feel victimized and alienated from the family.

### › The feelings and fear of losing your child can be changed, but will require some changes on your part.

No one says parenting is easy, especially in the raising of a child with ADHD.

### ADDITIONAL READING

**Russell A. Barkley**, *Taking Charge of ADHD: The Complete Authoritative Guide for Parents* (New York: The Guilford Press, 1995).

**Rudolf Dreikers**, *Children: The Challenge* (New York: Hawthorn Books, 1964).

**Thom Hartmann**, *Attention Deficit Disorder: A Different Perception* (Grass Valley, CA: Underwood Books, 1993).

**Edward Hallowell** and **John Ratey**, *Driven to Distraction: Recognizing and Coping with Attention Deficit Disorder from Childhood through Adult*. (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1994).